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»Russia's Bureaucratic Ruling Elite« Towards a Social Portrait of Russia's Higher Bureaucracy During the First Quarter of the 19th Century

*Igor N. Kiselev, Sergei V. Mironenko**

Abstract: An attempt is made to study the social structure of Russia's bureaucratic ruling elite during the first quarter of the 19th century. The work is done on the bases of a mass statistic source: service records of bureaucracy (formuliarnye spisky). The results of the research undermine common stereotypes in Soviet historiography. Among the higher bureaucratic elites one third owned no serfs whatsoever. A constant growth of this group was observed, especially in the central bureaucracy. Thus, a close analysis of the data disproves the widely-held belief that real power and authority in Russia was connected with the landed gentry.

Russia always was a bureaucratic state, a state in which power was on the side of the bureaucracy until present times. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the role and importance of the bureaucracy in Russian history. Even the tsar, whom the entire world considered the very symbol of autocracy, and despite the fact that enormous power was concentrated in his hands, had to take into account this set of institutions and persons involved, and to a certain extent was even depending directly of them. The French traveller Marquis de Custine, whose book »Russia in 1839« was a veritable sensation in Europe and went through many editions of enormous size for the time, well understood this important factor in Russia's political life. »Russia is ruled by a class of high civil servants,« as he pointed out. »From their chancelleries, these invisible despotes, these pygmy-tyrants oppress the country with impunity.« The bureaucratic system was so powerful, Custine said, that even the Emperor himself, although in principle enjoying unlimited power, in fact was fettered by bureaucrats. »And although this may sound paradoxical,« concluded Custine, »the Russian Tsar often remarks that he is not at all as mighty as people think,

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and with an astonishment which he is afraid to admit to himself, recognizes that his power is limited. The limiting factor is the bureaucracy.»(1)

Of course, various groups of bureaucrats had various forms of influence on the life of the country. Petty provincial civil servants doubtless had little occasion to alter the political course of the country or even to exert any sort of pressure on it. With the higher civil service it was a different matter. Despite of the undisputed importance of the Emperor in the political system, it determinantly influenced both the political situation and the development of the Russian Empire. This explains to a large extent the great attention devoted to this social formation in the historical writings.

Traditionally, historians have studied a small layer of the most important governmental figures, neglecting the masses of more insignificant clerks, whose attributes are difficult to catch grasp through the patina of time. It is clearly time to break with this tradition and to attempt to establish a broader representation of the governing elite of Russia. The irreplaceable primary sources for the study of the bureaucracy in general and of its highest level in particular, has always been diaries, memoirs and correspondence. An evaluation of these sources permitted to a certain extent to describe traits and characteristics of the bureaucratic elite during various historical periods and were used as a reliable information to a establish generalized view.

However, the subjective nature of these documents always provoked an aspiration to substantiate the results with more objective data, most widely with statistical data. To find a way to describe qualitative characteristics by quantitative figures.

Among the primary sources permitting this sort of analysis, are service records (formuliarnye spiski), which have been widely and successfully used by historians during the past two decades.(2) Service were produced since the second half of the 18th century. The usual procedures of the bureaucratic system, which unceasingly developed and grew more complex, required a new formula for accounting and controlling over the civil servants. With this in mind, special bureaus were established to carry out studies concerning the bureaucratic personnel. A first study, much like a census, took place in 1754-1756. The government called all state workers to give information about themselves (skaski), including biographical data (surname, first name, patronymic, title, rank, level of education, service data, number of serfs, etc.) On January 31, 1764 a decree was issued requiring service records to be sent to the Senate semi-annually. The decree was sent out with a sample form for the service records, which included five columns: 1) surname, first name, patronymic, and rank; 2) age in full years; 3) social position, number of male serfs, and place of living district-uezdy; 4) data of entering the service, current position; 5) promotions; 6) participation in military campaigns and battles; 1) disciplinary action. The

eighth column was filled in in case of a positive estimation for further service; the ninth column contained information about a possible pronation of the respondent. Two months later a new decree went out to systemize the keeping of similar service records in each institution. From that time the service record became a fundamental document, for pre-revolutionary Russian official affairs. Though the form changed, these service records were kept regularly until 1917. With an increasing quantity of information included. For example, more detailed data regarding the property owned by the official was required including reference to the source of the property: by inheritance, by dowry or through purchase. Data regarding marital status, number and age of children also were added later. However, the basic selection of data remained the same. This gives the researcher the possibility to study the ways in which the fundamental characteristics of the Russian bureaucracy changed from the second half of the 18th through the beginning of the 20th century.⁽³⁾ The subject of our research is the higher bureaucracy of Russia during this period. The amount of information contained in each individual service record, as well as the great number of service records produced during this entire period, would be entirely unmanageable without the use of a supercomputer. So, we decided, instead of limiting ourselves to a briefer chronological span, which would have severely weakened our ability to generalize across time, to concentrate our efforts on six time points within this period to have cross-sections of equal intervals. After building a data base using this material we aimed at being able to sketch out the social portrait of the higher bureaucracy.

As a starting date we chose 1802, instead at 1801, which might have been adequate as the first year of the century, but several important events during that year destabilized the bureaucratic system, making it less representative than its state of the following year. The events in question were connected to the murder of the Emperor Paul I, Alexander I's significant changes in the governmental apparatus, including the forced retirement of many officials devoted to Paul, as well as the promotion of those distrusted by him.

From that point, we moved forward in more or less twenty-five year intervals, choosing 1825 for the second nodal point (on the eve of the Decembrist revolt), followed by 1850 (at the »apogee« of the autocracy and quite close to the »Great Reforms«), 1875 (when one might hope to establish the changes in the direction of modernization get up by those reforms), may have come into effect 1901 (the first year of the 20th century), and 1916 (the last stable year of the old regime). At this time we have completed work on the first two nodal points, and have nearly completed the work for the third.

The first step in our project is to analyze the state of the higher bureaucracy during the first quarter of the 19th century, a period marked by the

War of 1812, the realization of a governmental reform program (including the establishment of the Ministries and the State Council), as well as certain failed attempts to completely overhaul the autocratic system (that is to free the serfs and to introduce a constitution).(4)

In order to separate the higher bureaucracy, in whose hands the governance of the empire was concentrated from the general mass of the petty officialdom, we employed a dual approach, which considers both the rank and the position of each official in central and local institutions. That is absolutely vital for the creation of an adequate portrait of the higher bureaucracy, because in the strictly bureaucratic Russian state, a wide range of persons not being civil servants in the proper sense earned bureaucratic ranks, for example doctors, artists, academics, professors, etc. For this reason, it is not sufficient to build a data base of all persons with a particular rank (for example, »state councillor« or even »actual state councillor«), as an instrument for the analysis of the ruling bureaucratic elite.

For our project we decided to include members of the State Council, senators, ministers, departmental directors, as well as civil servants with a rank not lower than the fifth rank (statskii sovetnik); from the provincial administration we included governors, vice-governors, highest ranking court officials (predsedateli palat), procurators, and marshals of the nobility. The total number of the officials there was 628 in 1802 and 684 in 1825. In the case of central government, we excluded the war and naval ministries as well as the Holy Synod. We also excluded medical officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The officials of the imperial court occupied a unique position within the administrative apparatus. These officials carried out specific tasks with no relationship to running the state. From these we included only officials who received petitions to the tsar (chinovniki komissii proshenii) and officials of the commission for the preparation of legislation (komissiiia sostavleniia zakonov).

After this procedure we were able to produce a list of officials of the ruling bureaucratic elite in 1802 and 1825 on the basis of data in the official governmental registers (Adres-kalendar) for 1802-1803 and 1825-1826. We analyzed the vast majority of service records used in this project at the Central State Historical Archive of the USSR (TsGIA SSSR, f. 1349, op. 3,4). For 1825 we evaluated a number of service records in the collections of the Central State Military Historical Archive (TsGVIA SSSR). If service records for the years 1802 and 1825 were unavailable, we collected information from either slightly later or slightly earlier sources.

Of the 628 civil servants who made up the higher bureaucratic elite in 1802, we were able to obtain service records for 224 (35,7%). For 1825 the picture is different. From the 684 civil servants of that year we dispose of 446 service records (65,2%).(5) It is clear that the percentage of surviving records is sufficiently high for 1802 and especially for 1825. The reason for

the discrepancy between the earlier and the later year to be found in the fact that record-keeping at the beginning of the century was less careful than later on. To a certain extent it is probable that the vast majority of the 1802 service records which did not survive in fact never existed.

In an other paper we have discussed the question of the representivity of the existing range of service records, as well as the haphazard nature of record keeping at that time.⁽⁶⁾ The question of the credibility of the information contained in the service records deserves special consideration. This is a most complicated issue, which we intend to elucidate in a later article. Given the limited scope of this article, we will center at this point to a few general observations. Obviously was in the state's interest to maintain precise, correct information on civil servants. Therefore, the presentation of false information by civil servants was regarded as a serious infraction, analogous to the counterfeiting of documents. As for the highest bureaucratic elite, which was of a very limited size, the fact that data concerning these individuals was well known, practically excludes the possibility of large scale inaccuracy. Of course, not all data included in the service records is of the same nature. While there is a small basis for doubt concerning the entries on social origin, education, service history and awards received, legitimate questions as to the accuracy of the entries regarding age and, what is more important, land and serf ownership may arise. As for »age«, a number of errors are well-known due to biographical research. A number of such errors may be attributed to the manner in which the question was formulated in the service records: not the exact birth date was requested but the number of full years at the time of filling out the service record. This caused a number of odd mistakes, the most wide-spread of which consisted in carrying over the same age from year to year. However, this kind of derivation is not significant keeping in mind the large number of records.

Finally, the matter of land and serf ownership is very touchy. One must assume that many civil servants had good reasons to hide their true economic situation. This is the most difficult area as to what extent information contained in the service records corresponded to reality. But it is difficult to imagine that the governor, who signed all of the service records of officials in his jurisdiction, did not have a rather precise idea concerning the material situation, in case of the various sources of income, of these officials. In the case of senators, ministers and, say, members of the State Council, it is a different matter. As a rule, they themselves signed their own service records.

Thus here one may expect all sorts of discrepancies. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that any of them (after all, they all were more or less well known), might own several hundred or thousand serfs, and respond »none« in the column devoted to this question: However, it must be

admitted that we do not dispose of complete and totally reliable data regarding land and serf ownership of these bureaucratic elites. And anyway, it would be impossible to verify completely the accuracy of these data, since this would require a similar, but independent series of documents, like the service records, but unfortunately no such documents exist.

The question concerning the ownership of land and serfs is doubtless the most important one for the social characterization of the higher bureaucratic elite. Who stood at the helm of the Russian state ship during the first quarter of the 19th century? Wealthy landlords, as decades of Soviet historiography has affirmed, or? Much depends on the answer to this question. The following table presents the data contained in the service records at our disposal.

Table 1. PROPERTY (%)

group	entire		center		province	
year	1802	1825	1802	1825	1802	1825
0	25.94	34.99	28.24	41.62	24.41	29.83
1-50	23.58	17.02	21.18	11.35	25.20	21.43
51-100	10.85	7.57	9.41	5.41	11.81	9.24
101-200	10.38	8.27	7.06	7.03	12.60	9.24
201-500	15.57	11.11	12.94	10.27	17.32	11.76
501-1000	4.72	8.98	7.06	11.35	3.15	7.14
1001-3000	6.60	7.09	10.59	6.49	3.94	7.56
3001-5000	1.42	2.36	1.18	2.70	1.57	2.10
over 5000	0.94	2.60	2.35	3.78	1	1.68
unknown	5.36	5.16	6.59	7.04	4.51	3.64

The results of our research undermine common stereotypes in Soviet historiography. Among the higher bureaucratic elites, in 1802 26% and in 1825 35% owned no serfs whatsoever. Moreover, one observes the constant growth of this group. Together with the petty landlords, who owned fifty serfs or fewer, they made up half of the social group here under consideration (50% in 1802 and 52% in 1825). It is interesting to note that the number of landless officials rose more quickly in the central bureaucracy. From 1802 to 1825 their numbers increased by 13%, whereas in the provinces the number of landless officials increased only by 5%. If one takes into consideration that at that time an estate with fifty serfs or fewer was scarcely likely to produce a very significant income, and was probably mortgaged to various credit institutions, then one may state that half of the higher bureaucracy of that time was a true bureaucracy. That is to say that the entire income and position of these officials depended upon their success within the bureaucratic system. Naturally, this strongly influenced their attitudes toward many issues crucial to the development of the coun-

try. Thus, if at the beginning of the 1860s the highest governmental authorities were able to abolish serfdom against the demands of the majority of landowners, then it could not have been accomplished without the existence of a powerful and highly developed bureaucratic apparatus, which did not attempt to defend the will and interests of the landed gentry. In other words, the autocracy, by means of its bureaucracy, carried out a policy entirely counter to the wishes and interests of its own social foundation, the landed gentry.

It must be noted that along with the rise in landless bureaucrats, one observes an increase in the number of the wealthiest landowners among the higher civil servants, that is within the proportion which owned five hundred serfs or more. In 1802 the latter accounted for 14% of the total, whereas in 1825 their number doubled, rising to 26%.

Data regarding the social origin of the higher officialdom, presented in table 2, testify to the social stability of this strata.

Table 2. OFFICIALS BY BIRTH (%)

group	entire		center		province	
year	1802	1825	1802	1825	1802	1825
tit. gentry	6.28	6.07	9.89	10.10	3.79	2.83
gentry	79.37	79.33	70.33	75.25	85.61	82.59
clergy	2.24	3.15	3.30	2.53	1.52	3.64
townsmen	1	1.35	—	2.02	—	0.81
merchants	—	0.45	—	0.51	—	0.40
ober-ofic.	3.59	5.62	5.49	3.54	2.27	7.29
others	8.52	4.04	10.99	6.06	6.82	2.43
unknown	0.45	0.22	—	0.50	0.75	—

In both 1802 and 1825 offspring of hereditary nobles made up 85% of all the higher bureaucratic elites, and 6% of them were descendants of princes, counts and barons. Variations in the social makeup of these higher elites between 1802 and 1825 are nearly insignificant. By 1825 among the higher bureaucratic elites one encounters descendants of townsman and merchants, as well as more sons of priests and the so-called »ober-ofitserskie deti«, that is children of military personnel born before their father had attained the rank of staff-officer, and with this rank, the right to hereditary nobility status. The latter grew in number in the provinces by 1825, while it decreased in the central bureaucratic apparatus, falling from 5.5% in 1802 to 3.5% in 1825.

Table 3. EDUCATION (%)

group year	entire			center			province		
	1802	1	1825	1802	1	1825	1802	1	1825
primary	—	1	0.90	—	1	0.50	—	1	1.21
high school	0.45	1	2.69	—	1	2.51	0.75	1	2.83
part. high.	—	1	0.67	—	1	—	—	1	1.21
higher	4.76	1	9.64	6.39	1	11.06	3.01	1	8.50
seminary	0.45	1	0.67	—	1	0.50	0.75	1	0.81
divinity	—	1	0.67	—	1	1.01	—	1	0.40
military	13.39	1	8.07	6.39	1	11.56	18.05	1	5.26
specialized	3.57	1	1.79	6.59	1	3.02	1.50	1	0.81
private	—	1	0.22	—	1	0.50	—	1	—
home	77.68	1	74.66	80.22	1	69.35	75.94	1	78.95

More than 70% of the higher civil servants of the Russian Empire received a »domashnoe obrazovanie«, i.e. they were educated at home, which in itself gives some indication of the poor level of education in the country. But it is difficult to define precisely this »domashnoe obrazovanie«. Although among those who received no formal education one may encounter some highly well educated individuals whose general level of knowledge excelled that of university graduates, the vast majority of persons who received their education at home were in fact poorly educated. In general, especially in the 18th century, »domashnoe obrazovanie« was of short duration, usually ending when the child had attained 15 years, and was mostly limited to training in Russian grammar, arithmetic, catechism, one or two foreign languages, with some general study of literature, geography and history. However, there is a weak, but clear tendency of more and more highly educated individuals to enter the higher bureaucracy. By 1825 the number of officials with »domashnoe obrazovanie« decreased by 3%, whereas the number of those with higher education increased by 5%. The number of those with a military education decreased by 5%, this was probably connected to the considerable decrease of the number of military personnel at the highest level of officialdom. In 1825, by comparison with 1802, there were 23% less higher officials with military training. Finally, whereas the number of higher officials with »domashnoe obrazovanie« in the central bureaucracy decreased by 11%, this proportion increased by 3% in the provincial bureaucracy.

Unfortunately, the service records do not contain precise information regarding ethnic origin. To some extent this may be deduced from the religious affiliation, which was included in each record. However, since it was typical for persons of other religious denomination to convert to Orthodoxy, when entering government service one must be careful in using

these data. Nevertheless, as can be seen from table 4, these data may be used indirectly to put light into this problem.

Table 4. RELIGION (%)

group	entire				center				province			
	year	1	1802	1825	1	1802	1825	1	1802	1825	1	1825
Orthodox	1	97.77	1	90.36	1	25.60	1	87.94	1	99.25	1	92.31
Catholic	1	0.89	1	3.14	1	2.20	1	4.52	1	—	1	2.02
Lutheran	1	1.34	1	5.83	1	2.20	1	6.03	1	0.75	1	5.67
Anglican	1	—	1	0.22	1	—	1	0.50	1	—	1	—
other	1	—	1	0.45	1	—	1	1.01	1	—	1	—

Here no major changes are to be seen. In 1802 (98%) and in 1825 (90%) the vast majority of higher bureaucrats were Russian Orthodox. There is a slight decrease between 1802 and 1825 (and we assume that the vast majority of these cases were Russians), and a slight increase in the number of Lutherans, Catholics, etc. It must be stated that these data do not confirm the assumption, widespread at the beginning of the last century, of a predominance of Germans in the higher bureaucracy.

Table 5, which presents our data concerning age distribution, given an interesting insight.

Table 5. AGE (%)

group	entire				center				province			
year	1802	1	1825	1	1802	1	1825	1	1802	1	1825	
under 35	14.35	1	6.58	1	21.43	1	5.13	1	9.60	1	7.72	
36-40	16.75	1	12.24	1	21.43	1	10.26	1	13.60	1	13.82	
41-50	33.97	1	33.79	1	26.19	1	31.79	1	39.20	1	35.37	
51-60	26.32	1	30.39	1	21.43	1	29.23	1	29.60	1	31.30	
61-70	8.13	1	14.06	1	9.52	1	18.97	1	7.20	1	10.16	
over 70	0.48	1	2.95	1	—	1	4.62	1	0.80	1	1.63	
unknown	6.70	1	1.12	1	7.69	1	2.01	1	6.02	1	0.40	

In general, there is a clear rise in the median age of the higher officials. At the beginning of the century there were twice as many young people (35 years of age or younger: 14% in 1892 versus 7% in 1825), while at the same time nearly half as many of them were sixty years and older. However, this process operated differently in the center and in the provinces. In the latter, there was almost no change in the distribution of age, which means that most of the changes occurred at the center. Thus, the number of officials below 35 years of age decreased by a factor of four, and those from 36 to 40 years of age, by a factor of two. So, the majority of higher officials both in 1802 and in 1825 consisted of persons forty to sixty years old.

Finally, we give some information on the question between the relationship of the higher bureaucracy and the court. It turns out that a large number of the highest officials held court titles. In 1802 8.5% of the total number of higher officials held such titles rising to 12.3% in 1825 which in our opinion is not a major change in this area.

In conclusion even our initial results, derived from the most simple analysis of the data, permit us to query, if not to reject many stereotypes to be found in recent historiography. Thus, a close analysis of the data disproves the widely-held belief that real power and authority in Russia at the beginning of the last century was connected with the landed gentry. Although a certain number of high officials were indeed wealthy landowners, they did not make up a majority of the ruling elite. Already at the beginning of the century the recruitment to the commanding levels of officialdom shows an increasing proportion of individuals which earned this living and defined their rank within society from their position in the bureaucracy. One cannot ignore this process, which takes on an ever greater significance over time, taking into consideration the coming and carrying out of the Great Reforms, as well as later historical developments.

On the other hand, the data also permits to confirm previously elaborated theories regarding the structure and growth of the higher bureaucracy. While it has always been assumed, that given the small number of institutions of higher learning as well as the absence of a tradition emphasizing the importance of such education in Russia at that time. In the case of the level of education of the higher civil servants, for example. The number of highly educated bureaucrats was underestimated, but without quantitative analysis, this was impossible to prove.

And finally, the preliminary social portrait of the higher bureaucratic elites during the first quarter of the 19th century now permits to make one general conclusion of great importance: the profound stability of the bureaucratic system of that time. There is practically no evidence either of a crisis within this system or of the beginning of its breakdown. Our research points almost entirely to the unchanging nature of the bureaucratic system. It is possible that as the century progressed certain tendencies of change arose; in this sense, our conclusions may seem premature. It is obvious, however, that our method of research, employed for the study of the higher bureaucratic elites right down to the fall of the monarchy, will help us to describe the process of breakdown to which that system became subject. But this remains a task for further research.

Notes

We would like to express our appreciation to Jonathan W. Daly for his translation this article from Russian into English.

1. Kustin A. Nikolajevskaja Rossia. La Russe en 1939. Moskva, 1990. S. 269.
2. Troickij S.M. Russkij absolutism i dvorianstvo v XVII v. Moskva, 1974; Zajonchkovski P. A. Pravitelstvennyj Apparat samodergavnoj Rossii v XIX v. Moskva, 1978; Pintner W. M. The Social Characteristics of the Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Bureaucracy // Slavic Review, 1970, sept. Pp.429-443; Pintner W.M. & Rowney D.K. Russian Officialdom. University of North Carolina Press, 1980.
3. For more details see: Kiselev I. N., Mironenko S. V. O chem rasskazali formuliarnye spiski. In: Chislo i Mysl. Vypusk 9. Moskva, 1986.
4. See: Mironenko S. V. Samodergavie i reformy: Politicheskaja borba v Rossii v nachale XIX v. Moskva, 1989.
5. Before 1825 we disposed of 442 service records, but we discovered four new ones afterwards. That is the reason why these figures differ slightly from those published. This discrepancy, incidentally, is quite insignificant and in no way alters our previous findings and conclusions.
6. Kiselev I. N., Mironenko S. V. Ibid. Since the selection of service records for 1802 survived in one complex of documents, conclusions made regarding the service records of 1825 are reliable for those of 1802, too.
7. Included here are all official whose service records for this column contain an »unknown«, or in general was not filled out. In previous studies, the absence of information under this heading was interpreted in the way that the official did not own any serfs. The attempt to obtain more reliable data has forced us to take a more rigorous approach to this question. In all the tables showing this »unknown« - the percentage indicated has been calculated from the entire mass of service records. All other data inserted under all the other headings refer to service records which contain the corresponding necessary data.